



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## Northern Ireland: Religion and Transitional Justice

Brewer, J. D., Mitchell, D., & Leavey, G. (2016). Northern Ireland: Religion and Transitional Justice. *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, 14, 74-91. <http://www.csq.ro/wp-content/uploads/5-CSQ14-John-D.-BREWER-David-MITCHELL-Gerard-LEAVEY.pdf>

**Published in:**  
Conflict Studies Quarterly

**Document Version:**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### **Publisher rights**

© 2015 The Author(s)

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits distribution and reproduction for non-commercial purposes, provided the author and source are cited.

### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

# Northern Ireland: Religion and Transitional Justice

John D. BREWER

David MITCHELL

Gerard LEAVEY

**Abstract.** *The right to practice religion is recognised as one of the universal liberties transitional justice interventions are designed to defend, and religion is often mentioned as one of the cultural factors that impact on local transitional justice practices from below. Many human rights cases of abuse, however, are motivated by religious extremism and the association of religion with conflict has largely discouraged reflection on its positive contribution to transitional justice. This field is undeveloped and the little work that elaborates its positive role is descriptive. This paper theorises the relationship between religion and transitional justice and develops a model for understanding its potential role that better allows an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. The model is applied to original research conducted on ex-combatants in Northern Ireland, and concludes that only in very limited circumstances can religious actors make a telling contribution to transitional justice. Understanding what these circumstances are is the purpose of the model developed here.*

**Keywords:** *Religion, Northern Ireland, Local Transitional Justice, Ex-combatants.*

## Introduction

Transitional justice is an interdisciplinary field. It has expanded its focus from the criminal processing of conflict-related crimes to the management of change after conflict and now shares its concerns with

John D. BREWER

Professor of Post Conflict Studies  
Institute for the Study of Conflict  
Transformation and Social Justice  
Queen's University, Belfast  
E-mail: j.brewer@qub.ac.uk

David MITCHELL

Assistant Professor in Conflict  
Resolution and Reconciliation  
Trinity College, Dublin  
E-mail: damitche@tcd.ie

Gerard LEAVEY

Professor of Mental Health and  
Wellbeing, University of Ulster  
E-mail: g.leavey@ulster.ac.uk

---

Conflict Studies Quarterly  
Issue 14, January 2016, pp. 74-91

disciplines like theology, religious studies and moral philosophy. Religious perspectives are posing a serious challenge to the human rights tradition that normally validates transitional justice studies, for religion can be one of the principal causes of the very conflicts transitional societies are recovering from and religious extremism poses one of the most serious threats to human rights. However, the relationship between religion and human rights is ambivalent. While most world religions have been active in struggles for universal human rights, they have also supported violence and repression. It is for reasons of such ambivalence that transitional justice scholars tend to ignore the contribution of religion as a resource in transitional justice practice and interventions, which explains why religion, when it intrudes in the intellectual field, does so in limited ways.

This paper first reviews some of the forms in which religion enters transitional justice studies. It locates this literature within broader intellectual currents that are themselves structurally determined by changes in that field. It discusses some of the limitations in this literature, the most significant of which is its inadequate conceptual mapping. This is used as the starting point for the formulation of a theoretical model which is proposed as one way to conceptualise the contribution of religion to transitional justice, drawing attention also the limitations of religion in the transitional justice field. The model is applied to Northern Ireland as a case study, based on a study of religion and ex-combatants. In the next section, the paper addresses the highly constrained ways in which religion enters transitional justice studies.

### **The discovery of religion**

There are two forms in which religion has penetrated transitional justice studies, which we call the neutral and the programmatic approaches. In the former, religion is incidental; in the latter it is fundamental. The neutral version comes in two types, referred to here as passive and active.

Dealing with its passive type first, the chief hallmark is that religion is coincidental to transitional justice, a random feature of the external environment that transitional justice practitioners have to negotiate in developing local interventions and practices. Universal declarations of people's human right always mention the importance of the liberty to practice religious rights, although transitional societies often find this right threatened or difficult to re-establish in the process of change see (Anderson, 2003). In practising this right, of course, transitional justice researchers recognise that religion is one of the contextual factors that affect local transitional justice interventions, sometimes facilitating, sometimes inhibiting bottom-up transitional justice. It does so, however, with no special status beside the whole array of other cultural processes that impinge on local transitional justice practices, such as gender, politics, history, and the like. Good examples are bottom-up transitional justice in Afghanistan (see Rubin, 2003), Sierra Leone (see Millar, 2010, 2011a, 2011b), Uganda (see Jackson, 2009), and Nepal

(see Robins, 2012), amongst others. Interestingly, religion has not been identified as a contextual factor explicitly structuring bottom-up transitional justice in Northern Ireland, where Lundy's work has almost pioneered the idea of local transitional practices (for example, 2011). In work such as this, religion is passive, one part of the environment that transitional justice practices have to negotiate, giving no meaning to these practices.

In other studies of transitional justice, religion is an active process that does affect the goals of the intervention and practice, sometimes to advantage, sometimes for ill. For example, Igreja (2012) has documented the positive role of indigenous religious traditions in healing practices in post-conflict Mozambique. On the other hand, Boesenecker and Vinjanmuri (2011; also see Vinjanmuri and Boesenecker, 2009) have shown how in the mediation of international human rights norms, some faith-based NGOs can lose sight of them in their translation to local circumstances, and others promote them. The contribution of religion to truth recovery has been widely used to illustrate the active role of religion and studies have shown its unevenness. Wilson's (2001, p. 134) account of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, points to the constructive role played by religious actors, arguing that religious groups and the churches in the Vaal region were the only local organisations explicitly working with the Commission towards the goal of reconciliation. To Brudholm (2008), however, the religious ethos given to the evidential process by the Chair, Archbishop Tutu, constrained victims' expressions of righteous anger, claiming that most felt themselves to be under a religious obligation to express forgiveness and purposely shoe-horned into doing so, by the way, their testimony was elicited, often through impromptu interventions by the Chair in requesting it. Both views can be right at the same time because of the markedly different form that the religious interventions took, which only highlights the importance of conceptual mapping when identifying the role religion plays in transitional justice.

However, to this neutral approach must be added another, which we call the programmatic approach. The programmatic approach is partisan when championing the positive contribution of religion to transitional justice and much more systematic in identifying the range of interventions and practices it can influence for the good. It is this approach that we wish to emphasise, for it reflects some fundamental realignments in the intellectual field that are themselves explicable by structural shifts in the conditions that produce these ideas.

There is a growing international literature on the positive role of religion in transitional justice that suits its characterisation as programmatic and agenda-setting. It fits, however, within a much broader intellectual shift, the emergence of a wider field called religious peacebuilding. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) is perhaps the intellectual leader of this trend, producing from its religion and peacebuilding research programme, which began in the late 1990s, a body of literature (as an example

see the work of David Smock, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2008). This has been referred to by various names, 'religious peacebuilding', 'religious conflict transformation', 'religious conflict resolution' and 'faith-based diplomacy' (see Coward and Smith, 2004; Shore, 2009; Schlack, 2009).

This work endorses the earlier arguments of Johnston (2003) on faith-based interventions in conflict, suggesting that religion can be a particularly significant factor in peace when one of more parties to the conflict has strong religious identities and when religious leaders come from all sides of the dispute. In earlier work Smock (2001) listed several key roles for faith-based NGOs in peace processes, amongst them training, mediation, conflict prevention, dialogue, and reconciliation. While this work has been criticised for its optimism, much of the challenge is designed to improve rather than impugn the idea of religious peacebuilding. Brewer, Higgins and Teeney (2010, pp. 1019-37; also 2011), for example, dispute that these claims apply where religion is involved in the contestation or elides with ethnicity, 'race' and structural cleavages, when churches take sides and associate with specific parties to the conflict and form part of regressive civil society, or where churches and para-church organisations uphold failed or failing states, but they nonetheless use these criticisms to try to advance the theorisation of religious peacebuilding.

The initial impetus to this literature came from North America, although there are some notable exceptions to US dominance of the field. Shore (2009), for example, addresses South Africa, Brewer, Higgins and Teeney Northern Ireland (2011), and Durward and Marsden (2009) collated a series of talks given in November 2007 at the UK Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst on 'engaging with religion for building peace'. But it is no coincidence that the stimulus to religious interventions in peacebuilding came from the cultural and political space of North America, for it is a post-Cold War phenomenon. The interest in the USA in religious peacebuilding is associated with the 'end of history' arguments that emerged at the fall of communism, and are about the universalisation of Western democracy as the final form of government. Religion, however, was drawn on as a resource for other reasons than the particular personal religious beliefs of neo-conservatives who advanced these claims to hegemony. There is a plurality of religions in the USA as part of its racial and ethnic mix, and the country has never witnessed religious or holy war and thus has no historical memory of religious hatred and violence of the kind that negatively affects the idea of public religion in most of Europe. Its separation of church and state ensures no one religion has become the established faith and accorded privileged political status as a result. It is also a society where religious practice remains high, against the trend toward secularisation elsewhere in the West, which encourages the US to take religion seriously.

What is more, the increasing importance of religion in post-Cold War conflicts, most notably in the Balkans but also more widely in the emergence of militant Islam, began to

affect US foreign and domestic policy interests in the late 1990s to the point where the focus on religion as a site for reconciliation became the reverse face of the attention on religion as a site of contestation. This is captured wonderfully in the title of a pioneering text in this genre by Scott Appleby (2000) when he referred at the beginning of the new millennium to *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, its capacity for peacemaking within the midst of its warmongering. The language used by advocates of religious peacebuilding mirrored that of the religious extremists they wished to counter, referring to 'religious militants for peace' (see, for example, Appleby, 1998). Religious peacebuilding thus became part of the US interest in procuring global political stability.

The repositioning of research focus to address this need has been dramatic. The USIP is not alone in establishing a research programme on religious peacebuilding; so did the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The US Institute for Global Engagement established a 'religion and security' initiative in 2003 designed to explore the intersection between religion and political stability, and Harvard University a 'religion in global politics' project. The American University in Washington DC, for example, has a large research programme funded by the Henry Luce Foundation on religious responses to violence; the same funder had earlier financed a seven-country study of grassroots religious peacebuilding lead by a team from Maryknoll Seminary in New York State (see Cejka and Bamat, 2003). New journals began to appear, such as *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* in 2002, and research centres and institutes sprang up to capture the zeitgeist, whose personnel have published many of the leading texts. Three can be mentioned for illustration. The Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Washington DC, is run by Marc Gopin, an expert on the role that religion and culture play in conflicts and conflict resolution, particularly in the Middle East (for a selection of Gopin's work see Gopin, 2000, 2002, 2012). The International Peace and Conflict Reconciliation Program at the American University in Washington DC is led by Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, an international expert on interfaith dialogue and Muslim contributions to conflict resolution (for example, Abu-Nimer, 2003, Abu-Nimer and Augsburg, 2009). The Yale Center for Faith and Culture is directed by Professor Miroslav Volf, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and author of several pioneering works on faith and the problems of reconciliation following mass violence, especially in the Balkans (see Volf, 1996, 2006). It is no coincidence therefore that personal religiosity and professional practice elide in some of the most well-known contributors, as their private faith motivates their research agenda. Some of these major texts are thus written from a standpoint of deep religious belief. One of the first discussions of 'political forgiveness' was written by a theologian (Shriver, 2009; also see Torrance, 2006; Volf, 2006), and some of the social science attempts to debate forgiveness are written from a Christian perspective (Amstutz, 2004), or use specific scriptural texts to flesh out the meaning of political forgiveness (Satha-Anand, 2002).

For the purposes of this paper it is significant that a further realignment in the intellectual landscape arose when religious peacebuilding was extended to an interest in religious contributions to transitional justice, and time has been spent in locating this trend in the emergence of the wider field of religious peacebuilding so that its cultural and political milieu can be understood. To reflect this shift, the US Social Science Research Council formed a working group on religion, reconciliation and transitional justice, and the famous Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University a restorative justice, reconciliation and peacebuilding initiative. There are many ways in which this new trend in transitional justice studies is manifest: work on the religious roots to restorative justice (for example, Hadley, 2001; Philpott, 2012), attention to the contribution of religion to truth recovery and memory (for example, Hayes and Tombs, 2001), its role in managing the aftermath of violence and mass atrocity (Brudholm and Cushman, 2009), as well as many works of advocacy, the best example of which is the pioneering writings of Daniel Philpott, who is a political scientist based in Notre Dame (for a selection see Philpott, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2012).

We call this the programmatic approach because of its advocacy. The thrust to the approach is that religion places a natural value on reconciliation, encourages its outworking in ways that form the crux of transitional justice practices, like apology, forgiveness, and empathy toward former enemies, and, in respecting justice, religion helps societies emerging out of conflict with the recovery of truth and the management of divided memories. Philpott, as the best representative of the approach, describes with evidence from around the globe just what important influence religion can have; and the examples are drawn from all the world religions (for example, Philpott, 2007a, pp. 184-187).

For all this effort, however, there is no theorisation of the relationship or any conceptual mapping that elaborates on the relationship so that we might understand what it is about religion that makes it useful in the transitional justice field. With the exception of the observation that religion has its greatest effect in transitional justice only when institutionally autonomous from the state, we do not told how religion works to this end. Advocacy, of course, tends to be like that. In what follows an attempt is made to conceptualise the relationship in such a way as to make it clear what it is about religion that can sometimes lend it great import in transitional justice, and sometimes not, enabling us to see when its role might be championed or avoided. We are, in the terms of this paper, being programmatic but with reservations, and suggest that like the neutral approach the programmatic one comes in two forms, an optimistic and a realist version.

### **A realist model for understanding religion and transitional justice**

To begin to understand the role of religion in transitional justice we need to distinguish two aspects to the relationship. The role of religion in transitional justice varies by the kind of religious input and the type of transitional justice intervention. We can distinguish these briefly as the foundation blocks to our model.



In terms of religious input, this can vary significantly. One way to distinguish religious inputs is to differentiate in terms of religious values, doctrine, organisation and personnel. Religious input can thus involve merely the use of vague religious principles and rhetoric as mobilisation and legitimisation strategies. Examples of this are the idea of Christian 'love' used as a pillar for reconciliation between victim and perpetrator (notably Ure, 2008), search for the spiritual roots to restorative justice or the use of Christian values to motivate truth recovery (notably Archbishop Tutu's Christian approach to his chairing of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission). The various activities of religious and faith-based NGOs, churches and para-church organisations in peacebuilding and reconciliation constitute one of the more obvious forms of religious input, emphasised strongly in Smock's special report on faith-based NGOs (2001). Input can also be more individualised, simply referring to the activities of key religious personnel, acting as particular role models of reconciliation, forgiveness or hope, a number of which are collated by Little (2007) and Gopin (2012), or when acting in concert as a significant collective group, as emphasised in Brewer, Higgins and Teeney's analysis of key church figures in Northern Ireland's peace process (2011). Another form of religious input is inter-faith dialogue to assist in relations between the three Abrahamic faiths, where various forms of doctrine in each are explored for their common Abrahamic core as the basis for dialogue.

Some of these forms of religious input utilise the special expertise of religious actors, or are exclusively religious in content, but others put religious actors and resources as only one amongst many secular possibilities, to be used as best fit the requirements. In this latter regard, religious inputs can compete with secular ones – religious and faith – based NGOs with human rights groups, women's groups and the rest, and religious values and doctrine can compete with moral frameworks that are secular. In some inputs therefore we see religion working to its strengths, in areas where there is relevance, expertise, useful contacts, powerful leverage and experience, in others it confuses and confounds the problem, perhaps with religious actors and NGOs simply getting in the way as well-meaning but naive amateurs. This suggests that religious inputs need to be carefully and strategically planned to see where they can best make a difference, rather than just thrown in regardless out of wish for religious actors to be seen to do something. Where religious inputs are appropriately placed, it follows there should be no hostility from competing contributors to the intrusion of religion.

The key problems around religious inputs are therefore twofold: determining which religious inputs are most appropriate; and, where thought to be so, trying to persuade the competing contributors not to go-it-alone but to develop fruitful collaboration between religious and non-religious inputs.

Distinguishing between kinds of religious input is not the only way to unpack the relationship between religion and transitional justice, the other is by the kind of transitional



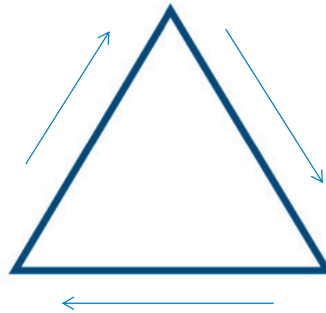
justice intervention in which religion gets involved. Interventions vary, such as truth recovery, managing the past, new forms of memory work, assisting in the social reintegration of ex-combatants, work with victims and the like, reparations and so on. We might refer to these as ways of transitional justice intervention. In one sense religion might be thought of as a synthesising and encompassing 'sacred canopy' hanging over all of society, competent to work in every field of transitional justice, from peacemaking to prisoners. The programmatic and pioneering ambitions of Philpott veer toward this position. He sees a very broad role for religion in transitional justice, mentioning reconciliation, forgiveness, truth commissions, trials, reparations, apologies, trauma relief, conflict resolution and peacebuilding (see especially, Philpott, 2007a).

However, the notion that religion is a sacred canopy with the competence to intervene in all walks of life is not a view that can be sustained in late modernity. Brewer's approach to the role of religion in transitional justice, for example, is more circumspect, seeing particular areas of the social peace process where religion is better suited than others, particularly in respect to truth recovery (see Brewer, 2010, p. 60) and work with prisoners (see for example, Brewer, Higgins and Teeney, 2011, pp. 64-67). The role of the churches in 'local' bottom-up truth recovery processes, for example, is especially noteworthy as alternatives to state-led, top-down processes, which are often in the control of the former regime, as occurred frequently in Latin America (see, for example, Rios, 2015). This happened, of course, precisely in societies where the Catholic Church was the dominant and largest civil society group, and the only civil society group with the authority, legitimacy and relative political safety to conduct rival truth recovery procedures in opposition to the state. Religion was not an input into truth recovery in Argentina or Rwanda (as noted by Philpott, 2007a, pp. 104-105). In the latter case this is because religious actors were eager participants in the slaughter, leaving the churches and religious-based NGOs with no credibility in calling for truth recovery afterwards and much to hide from any truth recovery process. The context to the intervention is therefore critical to the feasibility of a religious input in particular modes of intervention; and clearly, in addition to its obvious social structural dimensions, 'context' here includes the nature and history of the conflict itself.

This brief discussion suggests three variables are critical to understanding the potential contribution of religion to transitional justice – the type of religious input, the mode of intervention, and the context to the relationship, as represented in Figure 1.

This conceptual mapping implies that religion has a role in transitional justice when – and only when – the relevant types of input can be distinguished, the appropriate forms of input identified and the best modes of intervention specified, *for the context* in which it is occurring. This schema suggests there will be contexts in which religious inputs ought to occur when they currently do not, and contexts where the input is inappropriate or ought not to occur at all. Even enthusiasts who adopt what we call the optimistic

**Intervention**



**Input Context**

**Figure 1:** Religion and transitional justice

programmatic approach, where religious inputs are thought feasible in all modes of transitional justice and in all contexts, still ought to have the realism to caution religious actors to garner the information to understand which kind of religious input is needed, and what is the best mode of intervention to make for the specific context if it is not to backfire or prove counterproductive. In the section that follows, we apply the model to a particular case, ex-combatants in Northern Ireland's conflict, in which the conceptual distinction between input, intervention and context is used to advocate the more realist approach to religious contributions to transitional justice. It offers a counterweight to unbridled optimism, emphasising the strengths and weaknesses of religion.

### **Applying the model to religion and transitional justice in Northern Ireland**

This conceptual map helps us understand the strengths and weaknesses of the role of religion in transitional justice in Northern Ireland and provides the means by which we can evaluate its relevance to ex-combatants' transition to non-violence.

The schema suggests the need to have the most effective balance between input and intervention for the context at hand. Dealing first with context, at first sight, it might look as if the context in Northern Ireland rules out religion playing any role in transitional justice. The nature and history of the conflict gave it a religious hue as a result of the ethno-religious boundary markers of the groups involved, even though the substance of the conflict was thoroughly political. Wider social structural conditions ensured the survival of ancient colonial divisions, reproducing two cultural and political identities that encouraged and reinforced separation and separateness between the religious groups through forms of social distance, residential and educational segregation and political conflict. The context therefore made religion part of the problem, making it difficult for it to be seen as part of the solution.

This was not improved by the actions of the institutional churches themselves, which compounded the difficulties of the context. The inability of the institutional church to become involved in the peace process in active and overt ways, outside weak inputs like ritualised forms of condemnation of the violence, earned the institutional church no legitimacy that might by popular acclaim and political pressure pull the institutional church into intervening in the post-conflict public arena to lead debates about transitional justice issues around human rights, truth recovery, victimhood, forgiveness, hope, memory, righteous anger, victims and the like. Faith-based interventions were made by religious independents, mavericks and individuals working outside the institutional churches in religious orders and para-church organisations. Individuals from the mainstream churches gravitated to spaces of religious peacebuilding that were outside the control of conservative church hierarchies. Their inputs were limited by the lack of official status and authority that marked the interventions.

This constrained religious actors in their interventions, resulting in an almost exclusive focus on reconciliation work to improve relations between individual Catholics and Protestants. Reconciliation work is commendable. It offered a bright light in the midst of the darkness of barbarous violence. But this form of intervention prevented religious actors from dealing with other key issues in the transition from conflict to peace. Philpott (2007a, pp. 104-105), for example, notes the peculiarity of Northern Ireland for the failure of the churches to push for truth recovery processes. There is no lobby by them in the public sphere for a truth recovery process, and no involvement of the institutional church or religious actors in the community-led local processes set up as an alternative. Philpott explains this by the resistance of the British state to establish a formal process, although there was religious involvement in the government's Consultative Group on the Past (but its report, ironically, has slipped from history). This does not, however, absolve the institutional churches or individual religious actors from undertaking or pushing for community-led and local based truth recovery projects in combination with human rights groups and lobbyists.

In fact, there is no intervention by religious actors, faith-based NGOs, para-church groups, or the institutional church in any of the arenas which demarcate transitional justice studies. The context might be said to rule it out. Ambivalent about overt involvement in the political conflict, the institutional churches do not know how to intervene in the peace process. The religious hue to the conflict made them withdraw from the public sphere to avoid making matters worse, so they restricted themselves to the one input they felt this religious colouring made relevant – reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants – completely overlooking the social structural conditions that made these relations abnormal in the first place. This even included a failure to input into the social gospel in working class neighbourhoods where violence was embedded. This kind of context makes religious contributions to transitional justice very difficult, but there is no reason why it should have ruled rule it out altogether. This brings us to the

former combatants in Northern Ireland. They are important to the wider literature on religion and transitional justice because this was the one arena where religion was heavily involved in Northern Ireland's peace process.

### **Religion and ex-combatants**

The human rights tradition of transitional justice studies in Northern Ireland completely overlooks religion in its consideration of ex-combatants (see for example Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley and McGlynn, 2010). But advocates of the contribution of religion to transitional justice neglect it too. The judgement by Philpott (2007a, pp. 195-196) that Northern Ireland is a contrary case to the litany of places he lists as evidencing positive contributions, can only be sustained by neglecting the churches' work with prisoners, their families and ex-combatants in Northern Ireland. This is an input especially relevant to the calling of religious actors because of the biblical injunctions within Christianity to pastor to prisoners. And it is an arena for intervention which is easily able to exploit the expertise, contacts and familiarity garnered for religious actors through the system of prison chaplains, prison services and religious literature available inside, as well as the accessibility of jail inmates to religious actors and prisoners' potential receptivity to religious contemplation and reflection. Finally, the context – one of prolonged and bitter armed struggle – made this kind of input and intervention highly relevant for peace, since the imprimatur of ex-combatants and prisoners is critical to any deal and their own personal transformation from violence to peace is a measure of the likely success in negotiating one.

In this regard, the religious independents, mavericks and faith-based NGOs and para-church groups were very good in terms of contributing to transitional justice. The inputs took many forms, ranging from establishing dialogue with the paramilitary groups, acting as back channels for communication between the paramilitary groups and a host of other parties interested in ending the violence (other religious groups, political parties, government ministers, even with the secret service), facilitating political discussions between politicians and the political leaders of paramilitary groups to draw them away from an exclusively military strategy, hosting debates about political blueprints and running between interlocutors testing out various formulations of the wording, meeting with political prisoners and combatants inside the jails, assisting their families on the outside, and simple pastoral work in which they put themselves alongside prisoners and paramilitaries alike.

Some of these inputs were very effective indeed, especially back channel dialogue, but if we restrict ourselves to ex-combatants, the effectiveness of the interventions they made was constrained by the context of armed struggle. This context was an enablement to their inputs but a constraint on the effectiveness of the interventions. While there was every prospect for a significant input for religion in transitional justice interventions

with ex-combatants, this did not happen. Let us first show see why the potential for religious input was so high.

The context was an enablement to religious inputs in that Northern Ireland is peculiar in having a strong religious content to processes of cultural and political identity formation, ensuring that, personal faith or not, religion was taken seriously and was a reality that ex-combatants could not evade. In our research amongst a sample of ex-combatants we discovered two groups, those with and those without personal faith. With respect to those with faith, our sample of ex-combatants showed no greater tendency to belief than the general public and those who believed did so for the very same sets of reasons as anyone else. The evidence of personal faith amongst some former combatants means that combatant groups were not monolithic but extremely diverse in terms of their religious outlook. Combatant groups contained within them the array of religious commitment and unbelief of the wider society generally. It was noticeable amongst the non-believers that although they lacked personal faith, religion was still tied up with their cultural and political identity. Combatants emerged from and remained embedded in Northern Irish society, the result of social structural processes of cultural and political identity formation that religion represented. This means that armed struggle was not a poison that somehow infected society from the outside, or represented the actions of a small number of faithless, psychopathic killers; it was embedded in the very same cultural and political processes of identity formation that reproduced religious observance and identification in others. Religion was relevant to all the ex-combatants in our sample therefore, but in different ways. It is for this reason that we claim that the context enabled and facilitated religious inputs into transitional justice work with ex-combatants, giving the prospect for religion to have a major role in transitional justice.

Why did this not happen? While there was no evidence of direct religious motivation to violence amongst our respondents, religion offered little constraint on them either. If religion did not offer a clear and unambiguous motivation to war, religion offered little constraint preventing ex-combatants' take-up of arms or much effective encouragement to them to desist. In relation to their personal transition to non-violence, religion tended to confirm the commitment to peace that they had already developed as part of political and personal decision-making. Religion was at the heart of the cultures and the national identities of the communities that were perceived to be under threat, which restricted its capacity to prevent ex-combatants taking up arms. The decision to become a combatant for those with personal faith posed special dilemmas of course, giving them a burden of conscience that obligated a narrative that was very personal, even intimate, revealing a high level of reflexivity about moral issues. This was particularly so for Loyalist converts to evangelicalism inside the prisons. However, we argue that the prison experience was more important in the transition to non-violence for believers than any consideration of religion alone. Even the conversion experience for Loyalists-turned-evangelicals was influenced by prison. Religion caused fewer pangs of

conscience than one might have expected for those ex-combatants with personal faith because their sense of cultural and political identity furnished a moral framework in favour of armed struggle that negated the effects of personal faith in mitigated against it.

Religion and the prison experience, however, interacted with each other in contradictory ways. On the one hand, prison entailed experiences conducive to faith. It was brutalising, it interrupted individuals' lives by separating them from the outside, it gave ample time for reflection and debate, and it brought people into contact with religious messages which it was more difficult for them to avoid than when living on the outside. As a close-knit community, prison promoted a religious 'contagion' among some prisoners, something clearly evident in the stories of conversion, participation in the communal Rosaries and so on. For those with personal faith, the prison experience enhanced their commitment – an enhancement that enabled religious conversions amongst the formerly non-religious. Conversely, prison involved experiences and influences which were detrimental to faith. It gave the opportunity for political education which in many cases led Republicans away from religion. The close fellowship between combatants could deepen political resolve, encouraging the encounter with the un-thinking, taken-for-granted religiosity of their upbringing. Separated from the communal and family structures that made observance 'natural' for Catholics, some Republican prisoners lost faith. Loyalists never experienced community life in their neighbourhoods as the same constraint pushing them to observance, but such is the importance of community and family structures in the transmission of religion across the generations, that some Loyalist respondents noted the impact of the conversion of their parents, family and friends on their own encounter with God. In one case we see religion as a resource used to make sense of – and change – life on the outside (loss of faith and observance), in the other, religion is impacted by what happens outside and used as a resource to make sense of – and change – life on the inside (by means of religious conversion).

It is clear that religion was a key coping strategy to help respondents deal with the harshness and monotony of life inside jail. In this regard, the religious upbringing of many combatants was a significant factor regardless of whether or not they now considered themselves religious. A religious morality and sensibility that had lain dormant since their childhood was reawakened through the prison experience to show itself in either a temporary reinvigorated religiosity or religious conversion. Religious conversion was more likely to occur in those inmates with few other coping strategies. This reinforces the importance of political education for Republican prisoners as an alternative coping mechanism, the effects of which was often to cause them to question the 'natural Catholicity' of their Irishness, leading to a loss of faith. And the tendency of Loyalist prisoners toward using bodybuilding, gym and steroids, building up the body not the soul, as a coping strategy, ensured that Loyalist religious converts were a minority of the inmate population. This is not to suggest that Loyalist religious converts became religious merely as an alternative to bodybuilding. Religious conversion gave them a

sense of power, even mastery, over the prison experience in precisely the same way politics did for Republicans. Witnessing and preaching were a form of status and power inside prison and a way of transcending its brutalisation.

For these reasons we are right to argue that religion was an *enablement* for ex-combatants. But the ex-combatants also faced the institutional churches' opposition to armed struggle. The churches offered a cold climate for ex-combatants. Ex-combatants were free with their criticisms of the institutional church, despite the level of personal faith some displayed and the positive interaction most of them had with individual churchmen and women inside the prisons or on the streets. The institutional church rejected them, let them down, and failed to systematically support their political choice, first to take up and then to give up the armed struggle. In Republican views of the Catholic Church, there were a number of interrelated criticisms. There was the perception that the church was irrelevant to improving the difficult situation the Catholic community found itself in at the start 'the Troubles'. It was theologically conservative, offering no hope for people to improve their lot, ignored the clear Biblical bias towards the poor and oppressed, and was politically fearful of criticising the British state. Despite the close-knit parish system, Republican ex-combatants felt it was distant from the common people and failed to identify with their experiences as Republicans. While it is clearly the case that the overwhelming majority of Catholics did not follow our respondents into the armed struggle, and the greatest number in the congregation needed help in dealing with the very real effects of the military campaign that our respondents helped to cause, if the Catholic Church was to make a difference to the level of violence, it needed to engage with Sinn Féin as much as the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party and to dialogue with combatants as much as those in the pews who resisted violence. Brave individuals within the Catholic Church did this, the institutional church did not.

The sense of distance from the institutional church was perhaps even greater for Loyalist ex-combatants. Interviewees thought the Protestant churches should have had a greater role in both restraining Loyalist violence and mobilising on behalf of embattled and impoverished Loyalist communities. The mainstream Protestant churches did little to advance the social position of Loyalists in underprivileged neighbourhoods and their middle-class notions of respectability prevented them from developing the kind of close relationships with paramilitaries from which political dialogue, back channel communication and eventually peace grew. Evangelicals stole a march on the mainstream churches in this respect and where Loyalists express positive assessments of the churches, they refer to the prophetic presence of individual evangelicals and social gospel activists who were dialoguing with the paramilitaries and trying to address the poverty and disadvantage in Loyalist neighbourhoods.

The mediation of religion in the choice between armed struggle and non-violence therefore is not simple or direct. Catholic ex-combatants largely lost their faith in prison (or



before) and found a church unable to pastor to their immediate anxieties and concerns when thinking about the morality of armed struggle. Those who retained their faith reported religion to be secondary to what was already a developing political and personal momentum toward non-violence. Religion rationalised a decision already made. For Loyalists, conversion to evangelicalism simultaneously formed and reflected their transition to a peace strategy in the working class neighbourhoods where the paramilitaries held sway, regardless of Loyalists' personal faith. Putting this another way, the growing commitment of evangelical pastors in hard-line areas to a peace strategy helped Loyalist prisoners converted to evangelicalism confirm their decision against armed struggle, a conversion experience that was itself *not* largely motivated by contempt at a military strategy but by a series of serendipitous factors related to the prison experience.

The significant prospect there was for religious input into transitional justice interventions with ex-combatants in Northern Ireland as a result of the context of the conflict, was in effect stymied by that very context. It was a context in which the institutional churches were frightened of working closely with the ex-prisoners, in part because of disgust at their choice of armed struggle, as well as fear that doing so would be construed as offering religious support for it, but it was also in part the result of the institutional churches' own inability to become actively involved in transitional justice. It was left to religious mavericks, independents and individuals to dialogue with ex-combatants and the paramilitary organisations. This limited the nature and extent of the religious inputs because of the lack of official authority. Religion was ambivalent. In a setting of ethno-religious conflict like Northern Ireland, religious extremism helped construct antagonistic identities, which it was difficult for more liberal forms of religion to undercut. Ex-combatants were not all irreligious. Some in our study had personal faith, and some saw in a cultural religious mythology weak justifications for violence, but none experienced their faith or the institutional churches to which they either devoutly or nominally belonged as an encouragement to their choice of violence; nor an encouragement in their transition to non-violence. The first might be construed the institutional churches' greatest success in Northern Ireland, the second their greatest weakness.

## **Conclusion**

We have tried in this paper to give an overview of a relatively new sub-field of transitional justice studies, and to structurally locate it as part of wider trends, as well as report on an empirical case that illuminates it. Many themes have been woven together but the argument is simple and clear. The growing interest in religion and transitional justice studies needs to be located in a broader intellectual shift, the emergence of religious peacebuilding, whose formation in the current of post-Cold War triumphalism in the United States has made it a programmatic approach that is hugely optimistic. This contrasts with the earlier approaches in which religion was recognised as part of the environment affecting transitional justice but was largely neutral and minimal. The

programmatic approach enlightens our understanding of transitional justice by making us aware of the role of religion, but it is atheoretical and in need of conceptual mapping to enable us to see what it is specifically about religion that can impact on transitional justice and in what specific modes of transitional justice practice. But it is in need of a second corrective. Religious contributions to transitional justice can be exaggerated and are not always positive. The conceptual mapping outlined here draws a distinction between three aspects of the relationship between religion and transitional justice – religious inputs, modes of transitional justice intervention and context – whose interplay means we need to approach the relationship with realism rather than optimism. The case of ex-combatants in Northern Ireland illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship in a context where we might have expected it to flourish. Models are only as good as the empirical insights they illuminate. We suggest that the model outlined here proffers a conceptual map by which we can better plot the ambivalent contribution religion makes to transitional justice, meaning that optimistic programmatic accounts of this relationship need to be tempered with healthy doses of realism. This contribution, however, should not be ignored or denied despite its challenge to traditional human rights approaches to transitional justice. What we have here called the programmatic realist approach offers in our view the best balance when delineating religious contributions to transitional justice.

## References

1. Abu-Nimer, M. (2003). *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
2. Abu-Nimer, M., & Augsburg, D. (2009). *Peace-Building By, Between, and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
3. Amstutz, M. (2004). *The Healing of Nations*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
4. Anderson, J. (2003). *Religious Liberty in Transitional Societies: The Politics of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Appleby, S. (1998). Religion and Global Affairs: Religious Militants for Peace. *SAIS International Review*, 18, 38-44.
6. Appleby, S. (2000). *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
7. Boesenecker, A., & Vinjanmuri, L. (2011). Lost in Translation? Civil Society, Faith Based Organisations and the Negotiation of International Norms. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 5, 345-365.
8. Brewer, J. (2010). *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
9. Brewer, J., Higgins, G., & Teeney, F. (2010). Religious Peacemaking: A Conceptualisation. *Sociology*, 44, 1019-37.
10. Brewer, J., Higgins, G., & Teeney, F. (2011). *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
11. Brudholm, T. (2008). *Resentment's Virtue*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

12. Brudholm, T., & Cushman, T. (2009). *The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Cejka, M., & Bamat, T. (2003). *Artisans of Peace*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books.
14. Coward, H., & Smith, G. (2004). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. New York: SUNY Press.
15. Durward, R., & Marsden, L. (2009). *Religion, Conflict and Military Intervention*. Farnham: Ashgate.
16. Gopin, M. (2000). *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
17. Gopin, M. (2002). *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
18. Gopin, M. (2012). *Bridges Across and Impossible Divide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
19. Hadley, M. (2001). *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*. Albany NY: SUNY Press.
20. Hayes, M.A., & Tombs, D. (2001). *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*. Leominster: Gracewing.
21. Igreja, V. (2012). Multiple Temporalities in Indigenous Justice and Healing Practices in Mozambique. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 6, 404-422.
22. Jackson, P. (2009). Negotiating with Ghosts: Religion, Conflict and Peace in Northern Uganda. *Round Table*, 402, 319-332.
23. Johnson, D. (2003). *Faith-Based Diplomacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
24. Little, D. (2007). *Peacemakers in Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
25. Lundy, P. (2011). Paradoxes and Challenges of Transitional Justice at the "Local" Level: Historical Enquiries in Northern Ireland. *Contemporary Social Science*, 6, 89-106.
26. Millar, G. (2010). Local Evaluations of Truth Telling in Sierra Leone: Getting at "Why" Though a Qualitative Case Study Analysis. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4, 477-496.
27. Millar, G. (2011a). Local Evaluations of Justice through Truth Telling in Sierra Leone: Postwar Needs and Transitional Justice. *Human Rights Review*, 12, 515-535.
28. Millar, G. (2011b). Between Western Theory and Local Practice: Cultural Impediments to Truth-Telling in Sierra Leone. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 29, 177-199.
29. Philpott, D. (2006). *The Politics of Past Evil*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
30. Philpott, D. (2007a). What Religion Brings to Restorative Justice. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61, 93-110.
31. Philpott, D. (2007b). Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion. *American Political Science Review* 103, 516-528.
32. Philpott, D. (2009). When Faith Meets History: The Influence of Religion in Transitional Justice. In T. Brudholm & T. Cushman (Eds.), *The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity* (pp. 174-212). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
33. Philpott, D. (2012). *Just and Unjust Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
34. Rios, S. (2015). *Religion, Social Memory and Conflict*. London: Palgrave.
35. Robins, S. (2012). Transitional Justice as an Elite Discourse: Human Rights Practice Between the State and the Local in Post-Conflict Nepal. *Critical Asian Studies*, 44, 3-30.

36. Rubin, B.R. (2003). Transitional Justice and Human Rights in Afghanistan. *International Affairs*, 567-581.
37. Satha-Anand, C. (2002). Forgiveness in South East Asia. *Global Change, Peace and Security*, 22, 235-247.
38. Schlack, A. (2009). *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution*. Saarbrücken: VDM.
39. Shirlow, P., Tonge, J., McAuley, J., & McGlynn, C. (2010). *Abandoning Historical Conflict? Former Political Prisoners and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
40. Shore, M. (2009). *Religion and Conflict Resolution*. Farnham: Ashgate.
41. Shriver, D. (2009). *An Ethic for Enemies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
42. Smock, D. (2001). *Faith Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
43. Smock, D. (2002). *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
44. Smock, D. (2006). *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
45. Smock, D. (2008). *Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
46. Torrance, A. (2006). *The Theological grounds for Advocating Forgiveness in the Sociopolitical Realm*. Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity.
47. Ure, M. (2008). Introduction. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11, 283-298.
48. Volf, M. (1996). *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville: Abdingdon Press.
49. Volf, M. (2006). *The End of Memory*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
50. Vinjamuri, L., & Boesenecker, A. (2009). Religious Actors and Transitional Justice. In T. Banchoff (Ed.), *Religious Pluralism, Globalization and World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
51. Wilson, R. (2001). *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.